Playing in the MUD

Virtual Universes Available Online

BY KEVIN M. SAVETZ

Didn't your mother tell you not to play in the mud? Well, never mind her for now, because MUDs—multi-user dungeons—are among the most popular online diversions today. So grab your shovel and bit bucket, and come play in the MUD.

WHAT IS MUD?

MUDs are programs that allow you to interact in real time with other people in a virtual environment. Your surroundings might include any combination of characters, creatures, rooms and objects. Users in the world of a MUD can converse, move around, affect the environment, play games, program, hunt for treasure, and fight vile beasties.

MUDs are generally accessed by using the Internet's "telnet" program to connect to a remote MUD "server"—the program that is the heart of the simulated environment.

MUDs usually have various "locations" that players can move through by typing the compass directions. Objects can be manipulated with commands like GET, LOOK, EAT and THROW. Conversation with others users (and sometimes intelligent programs) is done using the SAY command, for speaking "aloud," and EMOTE, to show actions. (For instance, "waffle looks at you cross-eyed.") MUDs incorporate ideas from "real life," affectionately known as "RL" to mudders. On some MUDs, elements pilfered from RL include economic systems, household appliances, magic, and weddings. I'd tell you that MUDs can have "everything but the kitchen sink," but I know of one that has one of those, too.

Most MUDs are text-only. Although graphics-oriented MUDs exist, they have drawbacks. They are usually slower than text-only MUDs. Also, using a graphical MUD requires special "client" software that interprets the graphics data and displays it on your screen. Because there are so many computer systems—from Atari ST to Macintosh, from Sun to Z80s—it's not always possible to get the right client software for your machine. So, for now, text-based MUDs are the norm. Most mudders don't consider this a drawback, however. MUDs are quite like Zork and other text adventure games: the graphics are unnecessary when there are detailed and imaginative descriptions of players and objects.

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IS MUD A GAME?

That depends on who you ask. One "wizard" (a person who runs or helps keep control of a MUD) I know vehemently proclaims that his MUD is a "Social experiment in a text-based virtual reality." Maybe, but to most of his users, it's a game.

Each MUD has a theme. Connect to any given MUD, and you might find yourself on a drifting space station, in Medieval England, in a sprawling Northern California mansion, or in any other of a million scenarios. Because many MUDs differ in theme, scope and goals, each one attracts different sorts of users. Some MUDs allow users to cast spells, chase dragons, and frolic in a virtual wilderness with electronic gnomes. I think it would be safe to call this type of MUD a game. Then again, some MUDs are used mainly for programming, conversation and information exchange between professionals. Obviously, these aren't being used for gaming.

Many MUDs let users do what they will—if you're in the mood to be dragon bait, fine; if you would rather converse with users on the other side of the globe, that's fine too.

According to the *New Hacker's Dictionary* (a wholly nifty book, edited by Eric Raymond), MUD derives from an artificial intelligence experiment at the University of Essex in the early 1980s. Students on the European academic networks liberated the idea, creating a slew of derivatives with names like AberMUD, VaxMUD and LPMUD. MUDs crossed the Atlantic around 1988 and gained popularity in the United States. According to the book, a "second wave of MUDs emphasized social interaction, puzzles and cooperative world-building as opposed to combat and competition." Last year, over 50% of MUD sites were of a third major variety, LPMUD, which combines the combat and puzzle aspects of AberMUD with extendibility. The trend toward greater programmability and flexibility has continued.

As programmers create new types of MUDs, new names appear for the environments. These include TinyMud, DUM, MOO, MUCK, MUG, and a plethora of others. Although some types of systems are generally used for a certain type of game, the best way to find out what a certain MUD is like is to just connect to it. TinyMUDs are usually more socially oriented—players gather, chat, meet friends, and discuss things. The LP-family of MUDs are based on role playing games, so characters spend more time killing monsters, gathering treasure, or otherwise

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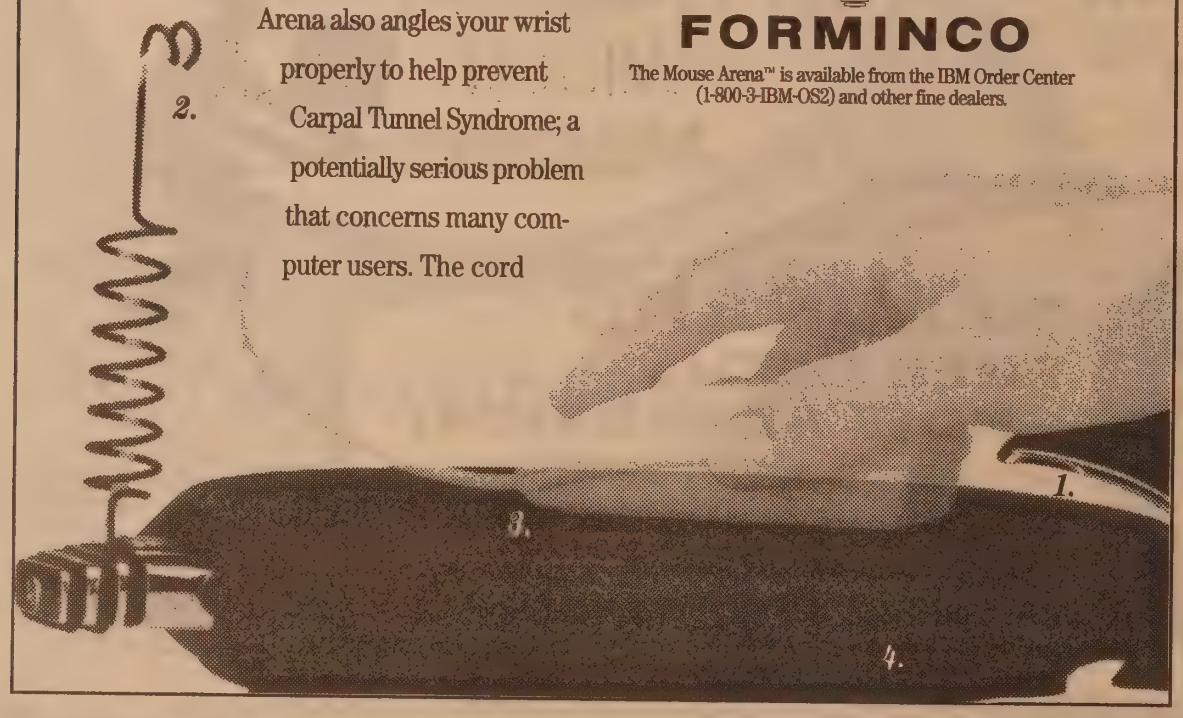

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trying to reach some goal. Some MUDs are based on score or level systems—the highest level is usually "wizard." Others—the ones that are more socially oriented — have no levels or scoring system. (Whoever is in charge, even on social MUDs, gets an ego-boosting title like "god" or "wizard.")

Most MUDs are open to the public: the first time you enter, you are asked for a name and a password. Then you're dropped into the virtual reality to fend for yourself. What you do then is up to you.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

There are several very good frequently asked questions and answer (FAQ) files available online that detail MUDs, MUD clients and servers, and a complete, current MUD-list.

The most recent versions of the MUD FAQs are available by anonymous FTP from ftp.math.okstate.edu (139.78.10.6) in "pub/muds/misc/mud-faq", plus on rtfm.mit.edu in "pub/usenet/alt.mud" as:
[rec.games.mud]:_FAQ_#1_3:_MUDs_and_MUDding
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[rec.games.mud]:_FAQ_#3_3:_RWHO_and__mudwho_
In addition, there are a variety of Usenet newsgroups related to MUDs:

rec.games.mud.announce Informational articles about MUDs. (Moderated)

rec.games.mud.diku All about DikuMuds.

rec.games.mud.lp Discussions of LPMUD

rec.games.mud.moo Discussion about MOO (Object Oriented MUD)

rec.games.mud.misc Various aspects of multi-user computer games.

rec.games.mud.tiny Discussion of Tiny MUDs, IE MUSH, MUSE and MOO

rec.games.mud.admin Administrative issues of multiuser dungeons.

alt.mud.german For German-speaking mudders. ■